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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000139

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DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN (PERRY); FRANKFURT FOR RCO BROWN

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TAGS: CVIS FR GM KFRD PGOV TX UK

SUBJECT: UNITED WE STAND (SORT OF): ASHGABAT'S WESTERN  
CONSULAR OFFICERS TALK SHOP

REF: A): ASHGABAT 0053 B): ASHGABAT 0086

Classified By: (U) AMBASSADOR TRACEY ANN JACOBSON FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND  
1D.

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SUMMARY  
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11. (SBU) On January 27, Consular officers from the U.S., German, British and French embassies met at the German Embassy in Asghabat to discuss shared consular trends and anti-fraud prevention measures pertinent to each embassy. Like the U.S. Embassy, EU embassies reported an increase in demand and fraud, a possible indication that more Turkmenistanis are eager to escape Turkmenistan's repressive and increasingly declining political and economic environment. While all were eager to share experiences and information on consular and fraud trends, our German and French colleagues were not receptive to proposals to engage in consular outreach to better inform Turkmenistanis about our respective visa rules and regulations. END SUMMARY.

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RISING DEMAND EQUALS RISING FRAUD  
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12. (SBU) According to Consular Chief Vera Gebhardt (who was joined by her assistant Nadine Lahayne), the German Embassy in Ashgabat has seen a steady increase in visa issuances over the past three years: from 3100 visas issued in 2003 to 3,600 issued in 2005. Seventy-five percent of visas issued were for those purchasing cars in Germany to bring back to Turkmenistan. The remaining recipients were those visiting family members, students, and businessmen. Gebhardt added that very few Turkmenistanis apply for tourist visas due to the high cost of expenses in Germany. The German embassy's 14 percent refusal rate is considered high compared to other German embassies in the former Soviet republics.

13. (SBU) Gebhardt said that the embassy did not have any information as to the number of overstays of those who received German/Schengen visas, since most who choose to remain do so outside of Germany. She did note that one group of concern are those applying to work as au pairs. In 2005, 30 Turkmenistanis went to Germany to work as au pair and only 11 (37 percent) came back. She added that in 2005, the German embassy had caught one applicant using a fake passport (Note: This was the first reported incident involving a fraudulent Turkmenistani passport. End Note)

14. (SBU) British Consular Officer David Baugh said that he issues many visas to relatives of Turkmenistanis who have

married UK citizens, as well as to maids who wish to work for them. The British Embassy is very concerned with the large number of falsified bank documents that applicants use to support their applications (Note: Baugh has provided us with samples of these documents. End Note.) When confronted with fraudulent documents, Baugh said that these banks refuse to officially acknowledge that they are indeed fraudulent, although informally they do.

**¶15.** (SBU) Baugh also said that the British Embassy has experienced problems with local tour agencies and visa facilitators, many of whom brief applicants on how to pass visa interviews. Baugh informed us of three agencies/expeditors who are constant offenders: Alsayhat (a local travel agency), Oxford Vision (a UK-based company run by a Turkmenistani currently living in the UK), and Klara Asadulina, a former travel agency worker who has supported many bad UK student visa applicants. (Note: In January 2005, Asadulina attempted to bribe post's NIV FSN, who ironically is also our fraud investigator. Thanks to information provided by Baugh, Asadulina is currently entered into the CLASS system as a P6E. End Note).

**¶16.** (SBU) French Consular Officer Sophie Guegan-Rivet said that in 2005 the French Embassy issued 400 visas, compared to 563 in 2004 and 291 in 2003. She said that French embassy had expected an increase in demand for visas, as well as fraud in 2005 with Turkmenistan Airlines' introduction of direct service to Paris, which did not materialize. Most French visas are issued to Schlumberger employees who go to France for training to work in the oil and gas fields in Turkmenistan. Guegan-Rivet added that she has also seen an increase in the number of Turkish citizens applying for French visas. Baugh added that he has also seen an increase

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in the number of inquiries from Iranians who wish to apply for British visas in Ashgabat. Baugh suggested that the increase in third country national applications may be attempts to circumvent long waiting lines in countries where citizens must wait for British and French visas, and that they see Ashgabat as a quick alternative.

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THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE  
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**¶17.** (SBU) Highlighting points mentioned in Post's recent anti-fraud summary (REF B), Conoff informed his European colleagues of the noted 20 percent increase in demand for visas, as well as post's observations of the constant use of fraudulent letters of invitation. While Post's visa demand was much lower compared to other embassies in the former Soviet Union, we expect a continued increase in demand and instances of fraud to rise, as the political and economic situation here continues to deteriorate. While we have already seen recent examples of increased sophistication of fraud employed to attempt to get visas, we have not experienced such a level of fraud as European embassies, largely since we do not place as high a value on bank statements and employment letters as EU consular sections must do as we are obliged to deny based upon the presumption of intent to immigrate.

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CONSULAR OUTREACH: US AND UK: TOGETHER (AND ALONE) AGAIN  
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**¶18.** (SBU) Noting that this meeting was the first formal exchange of ideas and experiences with Western embassies, Conoff expressed great appreciation for this meeting and invited his EU colleagues to observe American visa interviewing procedures and methods, an invitation warmly received. Conoff also suggested that the US and EU embassies explore opportunities for joint outreach, given the fact that our countries are highly popular destinations for work,

travel, and illegal migration. While Baugh expressed enthusiasm for such outreach, Gebhardt bluntly said that the German embassy does not wish to advertise its policies, fearing that it will attract more interest in traveling to Germany, ergo more work. While the German Embassy is glad to promote German culture, it is not comfortable doing anything on the consular front.

¶19. (SBU) Conoff and Baugh countered that such outreach should be considered as a means to better explain our visa procedures since as seen in the incidents of fraud, many people are not aware of what they can and cannot do, and could help combat human trafficking and illegal migration. In addition, such outreach, especially with GOTX interlocutors, could also serve as a means to elicit information about the GOTX, including the elusive State Service for the Registration of Foreigners. Recalling his close working experience with EU diplomats in Belarus, Conoff added that it is within all of our interests to work together, as we all share the same concerns in our line of work, and that we can and should work together. Conoff also offered to raise his proposal with other non-EU embassies whose countries are also popular with Turkmenistanis (i.e. Turkey, Russia, China, etc.) During this exchange, Guegan-Rivet sat noticeably silent, however her immediate cool reaction to Conoff's proposal suggests that she shares her German colleague's point of view.

¶10. (SBU) Conoff then expressed U.S. Embassy concern with the recently passed migration law (REF A), noting that many of its articles could prevent Turkmenistani citizens from traveling outside of Turkmenistan, including those who participate in USG exchanges. While Baugh also expressed concern with the law, Gebhardt and Guegan-Rivet did not express any opinion about the law.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (SBU) Our meeting marked the first time in recent memory that our embassies formally met to exchange ideas and experiences. While nothing groundbreaking occurred, it was a valuable opportunity to learn more about the problems and similarities shared by each other's consular sections. The increase in demand and instances of fraud reflect similar trends we have seen in our consular operations, and suggest

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that more and more people are eager to get while the getting is good. All agreed that we would continue to work closely with each other and share information about various fraud trends, and to regularly meet (Conoff offered to host the next meeting).

¶12. (C) The German and French embassies' reluctance to engage the local population on consular outreach is indicative of each embassy's general focus on cultural events and business facilitation. We will continue to engage our European colleagues to become more proactive in consular outreach, which would undoubtedly serve all of our interests, as well as those of Turkmenistanis eager to travel to our countries. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON